

WORKSHOP: LOCAL THEOLOGIES FOR A WORLD CHURCH

REPORT FROM MIDWEST MEMBERS' GROUP

I. Background

The "Local Theologies for a World Church" project (LTWC) has its roots in a growing awareness of new factors in the world which profoundly affect the proclamation and living of the gospel. The post World War II dissolution of European empires; increasing international economic dependence and interdependence; the tremendous growth of Christianity in Africa; predictions that 60% of Christians will live in the Third World by the year 2000; the extraordinary vitality of the Latin American church are but some of the factors which point to the end of North Atlantic ecclesial and theological dominance of Christianity. They indicate the emergence of a genuine world Church, constituted as a union of distinct regional churches, each with its own distinctive theologies, liturgies, and perhaps even polities. This world Church is very different from the world Church envisioned by a theology born of classical culture. That church was really the European church to be replicated everywhere in the world. Now the emergence of an authentic world Church requires theologians to reconsider the major issues and central tenets of the Christian faith.

To promote this reconsideration within the CTSA, Joseph Gremillion and Robert Schreiter each presented seminal papers at the 1981 convention.¹ At the 1982 meeting, Gremillion linked the CTSA and the Society for the Propagation of the Faith by means of a breakfast session devoted to a discussion of the relationships between world evangelization and theological education. Six individuals agreed to continue reflecting on these important issues with Gremillion and Schreiter between the 1982 and 1983 conventions and to seek ways to integrate them into CTSA's ongoing agenda.

This group decided to present a research proposal to the CTSA's Board of Directors at the 1983 convention. It sought financial support from CTSA to develop groups of theologians in the United States and Canada devoted to working on local theologies for a world Church. The group hoped to engage many other theologians in these issues and also to vitalize the CTSA on local levels.

In June of 1983, the Board of Directors of CTSA considered the proposal. Although they agreed that its goal and issues were extremely important, they decided that the research proposal itself did not fall within

¹ Robert Schreiter, "Local Theologies in the Local Church: Issues and Methods," and Joseph Gremillion, "North American Ecclesial Consciousness in its Global Context," *CTSA Proceedings* 36 (1981), 96-112 and 113-129 respectively.

the specific guidelines for CTSA sponsored research projects. Rather than rewriting the proposal to address the Board's concerns, the group decided to begin implementing the project and, perhaps, to seek CTSA financial support at a later date. One sign of the Society's interest and commitment to the project was its allocation of a program slot at the 1984 meeting for this interim report.

In September of 1983, a steering committee was formed for the LTWC project in the Midwest region. Its members are David Burrell (Notre Dame), William Burrows (Catholic Theological Union), Agnes Cunningham (St. Mary of the Lake Seminary), Carol Frances Jegen (Mundelein College), Frank Kane (Director of Community Services, Archdiocese of Chicago), Matthew Lamb (Marquette University), Michael Place (Mount St. Mary's), and Jon Nilson (Loyola University, serving as chairperson). As the membership indicates, the committee was formed in order to profit from a broad experiential base and to assure wide dissemination of the project and its results.

The 1983 proposal to CTSA had envisioned a research team model. The team would have generated papers on theological issues and methodologies, the results of which would then be coordinated with similar work in other parts of North America. In October of 1983, however, the committee decided to try another approach. Given the task of developing a genuinely local theology in and for the United States with an awareness of needs and experiences in other parts of the world, we asked how our theologizing here differed from that of Europe and Latin America. The result of our discussions was a "Stimulus Paper" on the context, content, and conduct of Roman Catholic theology in the United States. The committee then decided to invite reflective, experienced members of our local churches to meet with us and explore three issues: First, is the description of theology in the paper accurate? Second, what must be done to develop a theology more genuinely local and more globally aware? Third, what topic or issue should be the first point of inquiry for this task?

The approach we chose reflects our concern to develop a genuinely local theology, one that arises from and is in close touch with the local church. The committee was convinced that this task demands that theologians listen, especially to non-male, non-white, non-middle class members of the Church. We hope to avoid mistaking the academic theological agenda as the only theological agenda or as necessarily the most important theological agenda. Therefore, our goal has to be defined and advanced in a collaborative fashion.

II. A Sketch of the Process and its Results

The committee decided to gather approximately forty people, equally divided between academic theologians and "resource persons". Together they would spend most of a Saturday exploring in small groups possible answers to the three questions given above. Naturally, a few of those

whom we wanted to invite were not available for that day. Nonetheless, all those invited proved to be very personable and knowledgeable. The day, May 5, 1983, was primarily spent working in groups of approximately six individuals, each group moderated by a member of the steering committee.

The day began with an overview for all those invited. We then broke into our groups and explored the first question. After lunch and a brief review of the morning sessions, the groups reconvened to explore the second and third questions. At a final general session, we heard brief reports from each of the group leaders and opinions and reactions to the experience of the day from many of the participants.

Responses varied to the question, Is the description of theology given in the "Stimulus Paper" accurate? I will mention here just those reactions common to more than one of the small groups. First, minority groups were treated too facily. They are not near to being as empowered as the paper suggested. Many felt that we are still largely a church where all the important matter comes down from the top. Second, confusion, ambiguity, and powerlessness are prevalent experiences in our culture today. The Church and theology are not dealing with those as they should. Third, the paper implies that the church in the United States has reached maturity because we are no longer a mission country and a large number of Roman Catholics have reached professional and middle class status. Are these really the signs of the maturity of a local church? Should not gospel criteria be used to determine ecclesial maturity? Fourth, the paper lacks sufficient treatment of Christ and the gospel. The reaction was a call for theologies more clearly rooted in faith and addressed to faith. That is, the reaction urges the development of more theology in and for the Church as the people of God, not simply for academia.

Most groups combined the second question, What must be done to develop a theology more genuinely local and more globally aware, with the third, What should be the first topic or issue to be studied in this work?

Some groups suggested that the issue of power in the Church ought to be the focus of attention. They felt that redressing the imbalances and empowering all the Church would lead to fruitful resolutions of other major issues. Such developments would also lead to a more enriching form of pluralism, which is the distinctive note of our church in the United States.

One group further specified this approach by arguing that the role of women in the Church and society ought to be the focus. This issue seems almost unique to Catholicism in the United States. Solutions here could constitute our real contribution to the world Church. Further, they argued, the womens' issue is at the flash point now and it is a prism through which a number of other related issues may be understood and resolved.

Some groups suggested that the formation and development of small groups focused upon the Scripture would revitalize both local churches

and local theology. The model envisioned here seems akin to that of the RENEW program, which perhaps deserves more attention from theologians than it has heretofore received.

Finally, some groups argued for a process by which we would learn to see ourselves through the eyes of those who are being liberated here and around the world.

No matter which topic is chosen as the first focus of attention, everyone agreed on the urgency of one task: *Reinventing Theology as the Work of the People* (as the title of a recent book by Ian Fraser has it). Many of those who had been invited felt affirmed by the fact that theologians were actively seeking their advice and hoping for closer cooperation with them in a task of building up the local churches.

III. Theoretical and Practical Issues Arising from the Project Thus Far

First, as the foregoing indicates, most of the proposals for research topics and for practical actions were geared toward the strengthening of the Church precisely as local, towards making ours more truly a church of the people. How does the project obtain and maintain a global awareness if it works primarily in and for the local church context? Will not local issues loom so large and demand so much attention that the global perspective will get lost?

Second, what exactly is a local church? This issue clearly needs clarification and consensus before the project can proceed much further, since many practical issues depend upon its resolution.

Third, who participates? The steering committee selected participants for the meeting of May 5 very carefully. Theoretically, every member of a local church would have a right to participate in the formation of its theology. Practically, however, this is an impossibility. Furthermore, how can non-Catholics be invited and integrated into the project so that its results do not end up as "sickly" Catholic?

Fourth, how does a genuinely local theology relate to the work of professional theologians? to the theologies of other local churches? to the magisterium? to the other great world religions?

IV. Conclusion

Obviously, this project is still in a very seminal stage. The magnitude of the theoretical and practical issues which demand resolution would be overwhelming, were it not for the commitment of the steering committee to carry it through and for the interest and support of so many others. Speaking for the committee, I invite suggestions and advice from our fellow members of the CTSA.

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